

## CIA Operation

# Thai Army Units Fighting in Laos

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### Vientiane

With Royal Lao troops faltering throughout the country, American policymakers appear to have opted for an enlarged Thai Army presence, with active CIA support, to provide the backbone for ground operations against communist forces in Laos.

A former American official with wide experience in northern Laos estimated there are now at least 200 Americans at Long Cheng, an inaccessible base southwest of the Plain of Jars. He also said several thousand Thai troops are now holding positions against Communist troops in northern Laos.\*

A Royal Lao army officer stationed at Vang Vieng, a key town west of the Plain of Jars, said four battalions of Thai soldiers are currently stationed at Long Cheng.

### MERCENARIES

Ethnic Lao mercenaries from Thailand and regular Thai army troops are reported to be part of "SGU" (special guerrilla units) forces run by the CIA in southern Laos, stationed at Vang Vieng, a town run by the CIA in southern Laos. A provincial town of Attapeu said there was also a Thai artillery unit there when the town fell on April 30.

The decision to support Thai guerrillas instead of expanding direct military aid to the Lao government has set off ill feeling here, especially in the Lao military. Minister of Defense, Sisouk na Champassak asserted the Thais were demanding a high price for their military involvement.

According to former American officials, many of the mercenaries in the CIA's "Clandestine Army" are from Thailand, some directly transferred from the Thai Special Forces.

Lao and American government sources here admit Thai troops were involved in the defense of Moun Soui, a district town west of the Plain of Jars guarding access to the main north south highway.

\*Journalists have been continually denied access to the frontline areas of northern Laos, but occasional press junkets to the north have created the impression Meo tribesmen and native Lao are the only troops fighting there for the Royal Lao government.

One former American official said, however, the "Meo have been decimated; they don't have any more than 5000 men under arms... and at least half of those are Lao Theung (another tribal group)."

The entire operation is given logistic support by U.S.-contracted Air America and Continental aircraft, and is commanded by the CIA from headquarters at Udorn Air Force Base in northeastern Thailand.

Before security deteriorated at Long Cheng last spring, squadrons of T-28's piloted by Americans, Thai and Lao also operated out of Long Cheng's giant airstrip, the former American official said. Thai piloted planes were elements of the Royal Thai air force.

Acknowledging the presence of Thai at Moun Soui, Assistant Minister of Defense Sisouk was contemptuous of Thai troops in Laos. "They drink beer while we drink water," he said.

A Lao army officer stationed at Moun Soui said there were two Thai battalions there. In addition, all seven Lao battalions were given Thai advisers.

The Thai presence was at first disguised. Thai troops wore Lao uniforms and carried Lao identity cards.

Despite the secrecy, it soon became evident to the population they were Thais.

A Lao officer said Lao soldiers were not happy with the Thai or Americans at Moun Soui. Thai soldiers got double pay; officers, in addition, got \$6 per day bonuses. He also said that the Americans and Thai all lived in relative luxury and lorded over the Lao.

### RESENTMENT

According to other sources, another major cause of Lao resentment against Thai and Americans is that CIA and U.S. army officials often work with the Lao through Thai military officers who speak English. Every CIA official also has a Thai 'honcho' who, in the words of a Lao-speaking American, "tell them just what they want to... The Thai end up making policy."

According to the Lao officer, after Moun Soui fell, five new Thai battalions were sent into northeastern Laos.